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ABSTRACT

Teachers engaged in action research are involved in a process that focuses on how they and their students construct and reconstruct learning experiences, thereby extending professionalism and creating additional learning opportunities for students. This paper describes the evolution of an action research project involving an elementary school teacher in collaboration with a school district researcher over a period of about 5 years. Critical incidents are documented and samples of action research activities are used to illustrate progress. Also documented is the impact of the research on classroom practice, lessons learned, and a personal statement about growth and development of the researchers. The role of both participants in this process is described using a group development framework. Five key stages are presented: initiation, dependence, rebellion, cohesion, and interdependence. The paper concludes with a summary chart presenting the many stages of action research, a series of reflective statements, and 67 selected references dealing with teacher effectiveness, teacher-as-researcher, and collaborative action research. (LL)

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THE EVOLUTION AND VALUE OF TEACHER RESEARCH IN THE CHANGE PROCESS:

FROM LEARNING STYLES TO CONFERENCING

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April 22, 1992

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PROLOGUE

The history of action research has been well documented in the research literature. During the last two decades there has been an increasing number of initiatives in the area. In particular, recent initiatives in school restructuring and school improvement have given new meaning and value to teacher action research. Furthermore, the involvement of teachers in systematic inquiry can enhance self-confidence and feelings of empowerment. Teachers engaged in action research are involved in a powerful process that focuses on how they and their students construct and reconstruct learning experiences. Not only are such teachers extending their own professionalism, but they are also creating additional learning opportunities for their students.

My initial involvement in action research activities began while I was working for the South Australian Education Department during the 1970s. I learned that it was difficult to really understand a social system without trying to change it. Furthermore, I discovered that traditional educational research was often an alienating process. Teachers did not enjoy having research done to them. Consequently, teachers were often personally disconnected from the results of the research and saw the research as being unrelated to what was really happening in schools. Increasingly I became convinced that educational research should stress participation and focus on informing practice. The task should be one of assisting teachers to make meaning of what was happening in their own classrooms so as to better meet the needs of their students. In other words, it was important for educational research to not only be concerned with the generation of new knowledge, but to also become a meaningful learning experience.

Action research involves a renewing process that includes initial planning, observation, action and reflection. Although the teacher-as-researcher may work alone it is preferable that some form of consultation or collaboration occur so that cooperative planning and ongoing dialogue can occur. By making action research a shared or

collaborative enterprise, then critical dialogue can occur and the process becomes an educative one.

The focus on classroom improvement helps the teacher view the classroom as a small culture created by the teacher and students over time. It also enables the teacher to address the complexities of classroom life and to consider the everyday situational decision-making that occurs in the classroom. The teacher has an opportunity to select research questions that are personally meaningful and that will yield information that can be used to better meet the needs of children. Such a focus provides the teacher with opportunities to implement and refine content, to improve instructional skills and to effectively use and integrate teaching and learning strategies. In many ways, action research enables teachers to articulate their own taken-for-granted practice and to expose invisible knowledge.

When the teacher engages in action research there is little question that the teacher becomes an active learner. The teacher develops professionally and personally. Personal development is often related to an individual's age or stage of development. Another aspect of development that should be considered, however, is career development. Just as life stages have salient characteristics, so do stages of professional careers. Activities, primary relationships and major psychological issues that are linked with these different career stages may have an impact on the action research process.

In the following paper, the evolution of action research involving one particular teacher, in collaboration with a school district researcher, is examined over a period of about five years. The role of both participants in this process is described using a group development framework. Critical incidents are documented and samples of the action research activities are used to illustrate the progression of the action research. The paper concludes with a series of reflective statements jointly prepared by the teacher and researcher.

INTRODUCTION

For the past several years the authors, a practising classroom teacher and a school district researcher, have been working together on classroom based research. Their co-operative endeavours have evolved from classroom based ethnographic research undertaken primarily by the school district researcher, to teacher-as-researcher, to a form of collaborative action research.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of the action research that has occurred. From a traditional qualitative approach where the research was essentially done to the researcher, the next phase was a teacher-as-researcher one where the school district researcher became a facilitator of the teacher's own classroom based research activities. The current phase is one where the teacher and researcher are working collaboratively together during all phases of the action research cycle. In addition to this description of the process, the paper will document the impact of the research on classroom practice. The lessons learned by the authors and a personal statement about their own growth and development will also be shared.

SCENARIO

The evolution of the action research involving the teacher and researcher will be described using a conceptual framework used by the author in previous work on classroom group development (Lafleur, 1979). Five key stages will be used: initiation, dependence, rebellion, cohesion and interdependence.

Initiation Stage

In this stage the teacher and researcher met as independent professionals.

About six or seven years ago I was involved in a system-wide review of an intermediate level English program. My role was that of research consultant to the review; I also provided technical assistance to the project. It was at this time that I met Jack, an elementary school

teacher, who, by virtue of his membership on the district's English Subject Council, had agreed to be a member of the review team.

As a result of our work together on this Intermediate English Review, I was invited by Jack to visit his classroom. He was particularly interested in developing further some practical strategies on curriculum integration that he and a teaching colleague had initiated.

My initial visits gave me an opportunity to talk with children and teachers on a regular basis. At the same time, Jack and I were talking about instructional strategies in a very open and non-threatening manner. Somehow we mutually agreed not only to continue these visits, but also to give them more structure and purpose.

Issues related to doing action research and working collaboratively together were not discussed at this time. It would seem, however, that a more deliberate decision to initiate action research activities would require a discussion of expectations and clarification of roles.

Dependence Stage

In this stage the researcher undertook traditional classroom based research and the teacher supported his involvement.

Following a few initial visits, I negotiated a role as participant observer in Jack's classroom. My task was to describe the classroom environment and the everyday nature of life in the classroom. My particular focus was on teaching and learning and the children's responses to curriculum integration. In addition, I met regularly with Jack, within the class and the school as well as outside of the school, to discuss my findings and to discuss educational issues of mutual interest.

There were no external pressures for either one of us to work together. There was no system expectation. I had no need to engage in such research and to publish the results. Jack was not

enroled in further graduate studies nor did he have any expectation from the principal to undertake such a project.

As an educator with system responsibilities, this was one of only a few regular in-school activities to which I had access. It was a refreshing and necessary contact with classroom activities and children. In other words, it afforded me an opportunity to better connect my own professional activities.

Jack, on the other hand, was interested in how published research could assist him in his classroom. He saw me as a way of more easily accessing relevant research. In addition, Jack welcomed me as a potential third party observer - someone who could give him feedback on his teaching.

At about the same time that I began working with Jack, I was involved with a group of teachers and consultants who were interested in starting a district-wide Learning Styles Network. The Network was informally organized and run by interested individuals who usually met once a month during the school year. The Learning Styles Network was essentially a rubric for discussing issues related to classroom improvement and quality learning in classrooms. The focus was on instructional strategies that would better meet the learning needs of children. As a result, a variety of approaches were considered.

Transition

By participating in a system-wide Learning Styles Network, the teacher was encouraged to become more involved in classroom inquiry.

At my invitation Jack became actively involved in the Network activities. He found the work of Gregorc and Butler most compatible with his own thinking and practice. It was during this period of time that Jack began to develop and apply his own ideas about how best to meet the learning needs of his students. In the Network he found a forum for sharing and refining his

ideas. He organized workshops for the Network and even began to offer mini workshop sessions in his school and to outside groups in the area.

For the first time Jack began to use the results of research to actually solve real situations in his own classroom. The research on learning styles made a difference and became an integral part of the classroom curriculum. As a consequence, Jack wanted to learn more and to have more control over the research in his own classroom.

The Rebellion Stage

In this stage the teacher challenged the researcher for control of the classroom based research and engaged in teacher-as-researcher activities, relegating the researcher to a support role.

After several months in the Learning Styles Network, a clear transfer of research responsibility began to emerge in Jack's classroom. I was no longer the principal researcher. Jack began to implement the ideas he had picked up in the Network and was assuming the role of teacher-researcher. My role was clearly shifted to that of facilitator. In other words, we discussed and negotiated questions to examine, interventions to implement and methods to use. I also provided technical assistance, that is, the resources to produce data collection instruments and analyze data.

The potential of action research as an effective way of fostering professional growth and development began to emerge at this time.

Transition

There were increasing pressures to work co-operatively together. In addition, the teacher wanted to share his activities with others and to be acknowledged for the work being undertaken.

Writing became an issue when we agreed to share our efforts more formally. Doing research in his own classroom had increased Jack's workload substantially. To formally document these activities, even though there was high motivation to do so, was an additional burden. This was not a system mandated exercise; there were no course requirements to meet. Nevertheless, there was excitement, a sense of discovery, and a liberating feeling that had to be shared. There was a need for feedback and further dialogue, perhaps even collaboration with others on similar classroom research projects.

The opportunity to present a paper at the Ontario Educational Research Council annual meeting provided the push that was needed. The extra effort to prepare a paper and the actual presentation added a sense of accomplishment to the process. The task of writing helped us to critically examine what we had done. Not only did it force us to document the findings of our research, but it also challenged us to reflect critically upon the action research process. In addition, for the first time we received feedback and discussed issues related to our research with other educators. Valuable links with other teacher researchers were established. Furthermore, the real possibility of continuing the classroom research and renewing the focus revitalized Jack's interest in the teacher-as-researcher process.

Cohesion Stage

The teacher and researcher planned and worked co-operatively together during all phases of the action research process, acknowledging and building upon the strengths of both participants. During this stage there appeared to be an evolving sophistication, not only in the nature of the action research, but also in the level of collaboration.

As a result of preparing and presenting our first formal paper on the work we had been doing, Jack became more aware of the action research process. For example, as a result of his teacher research, he was able to articulate an action research framework very similar to that postulated by many substantial and acknowledged researchers. A four stage model that involved planning,

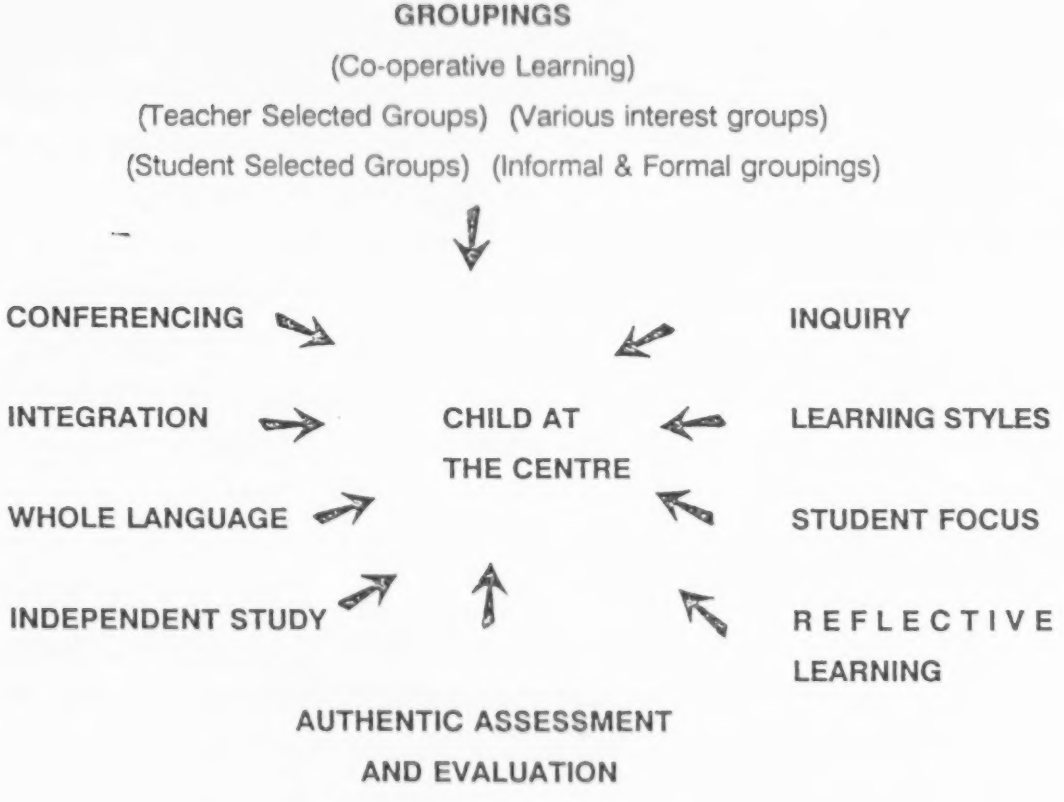
observing, acting and reflecting, was used to illustrate how Jack developed a practical student learning profile. Jack's comments indicate the value of this model:

> This model provides a way of thinking systematically about what happened in my classroom. It is action oriented. Hopefully each progression through the model has resulted in a revised plan and a better way of understanding and meeting the needs of my students. (1989)

Subsequently, Jack received a small grant to continue action research in his classroom. Not only did this assist him carry on with his classroom based research, but it also gave him a much needed motivational boost - some recognition for the work he was doing. Along with the excitement of the chase and the positive feedback that Jack experienced, there were many frustrations and low points. As a result, I was not only a researcher-facilitator, but I have also learned to be a good listener and became a trusted colleague and friend.

Another opportunity to jointly present a paper at the National Staff Development Council annual conference gave Jack a further opportunity to describe how action research had contributed to his own professional development. In this session Jack was able to use his involvement with the action research process to help him articulate how an initial focus on the learning styles of children had shifted to a more holistic focus on what he labelled "the child at the center of learning". By critically reflecting upon his own practice, Jack was able to make meaning of what was happening in his classroom and began to reconstruct the curriculum and refocus his classroom activities. "The child at the center of learning" was a convenient and sensible way for him to reduce the data into a personally meaningful and coherent framework. (see diagram) It represented a web of connected ideas that had emerged from practical yet relatively invisible knowledge that had been embedded in everyday teaching practices.

A noteworthy subtitle of Jack's paper on the child at the centre was "revitalizing teaching through action research". It is fascinating to witness the sense of efficacy and renewal of motivation and interest that Jack has experienced through his involvement in action research.


GROUPINGS
(Co-operative Learning)
(Teacher Selected Groups) (Various interest groups)
(Student Selected Groups) (Informal & Formal groupings)
CONFERENCING
INQUIRY
INTEGRATION
CHILD AT
THE CENTRE
LEARNING STYLES
WHOLE LANGUAGE
STUDENT FOCUS
INDEPENDENT STUDY
REFLECTIVE
LEARNING
AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT
AND EVALUATION

The focus of subsequent action research activities concentrated on a more systematic investigation of one dimension of the student learning profile that Jack first developed and one that was central to the child at the center of learning model, namely, conferencing. Conferencing was viewed as a method of regularly communicating about the student's learning and involved the teacher, student and parents; it also included a formative student assessment component.

This stage of the action research process resulted in a substantial shift toward more traditional methods of research. At Jack's request, not only were previous approaches such as observations, journals, portfolios and discussions used to gather data, but a variety of student instruments were also examined and selected for use during the school year. The action research seemed to be characterized by a more probing and in-depth investigation of the different dimensions of conferencing and the impact on students. The scope of the research demanded that the teacher and researcher work closely together. Based on the relationship that had already been established a productive and collaborative working partnership continued to develop.

A third major paper presentation highlighted the extremely large and rich data base that we had accumulated. The paper that was subsequently prepared and presented at another annual meeting of the Ontario Educational Research Council was titled "How Conferencing Can Improve Student Self-Esteem And Promote An Effective Learning Environment In Your Classroom". Although it included complementary qualitative and quantitative approaches for systematically collecting information, and a modicum of research sophistication, the research was still very much a collaborative process that was dedicated to action in the classroom. The findings of the research were used to make sense of classroom activities and to assist Jack reflect on his own teaching strategies so as to meet better the needs of his students.

Interdependent Stage

In this stage the teacher and researcher worked interdependently, that is, they acted as independent professionals choosing to collaborate when necessary.

At the present time Jack is consolidating some of his classroom based research findings. Large scale data collection initiatives have been replaced by a series of ongoing smaller projects. On the surface his daily decisions are informed by observations, student journal entries, conferences, and a myriad of other strategies. What was once a definable action research project has now become a part of the everyday reality of classroom practice. The difference, however, is that Jack is more aware of the process of constructing and reconstructing student learning experiences. He is able to give form and function to what might previously have remained invisible knowledge.

Jack has written the following comment in response to this proposed stage of action research:

> I have remained eager and still influenced by the need to know. The researcher continues to share ideas and recommend directions that are helpful to me. I enjoy our collaboration and respect the researchers expertise, but I also **know** that we have developed an effective partnership. I have worked hard to achieve my own status in the field of classroom research.... As I see it, the researcher is sharing his ideas and participating in the action research process with me, the teacher, as his academic and professional equal.

Both participants in this process are now negotiating another professional venture together. As far as the action research is concerned, we get together less frequently, however, on a regular basis, to discuss a number of related teaching and learning issues.

As with any developmental model, two key themes seemed to be present in various forms and degrees over the entire period of our time together. These themes involved issues related to the distribution of **power** and **affection**. Although this paper will not explore these themes further, they are reflected in the summary chart that appears on the next pages.

Summary of Stages of Action Research

Stage of Development	Focus	Teacher's Role	Researcher's Role
0	Initiating	Teacher decides to participate, communicates expectations and negotiates terms of the action research.	Researcher decides to participate, communicates expectations and negotiates terms of the action research.
1	Dependence	Teacher relies on the researcher for direction and advice. Teacher facilitates researcher activities.	Researcher provides structure. Researcher is "in" authority and "an" authority.
2	Rebellion	Teacher challenges researcher for more control of classroom based inquiry and becomes teacher-as-researcher in own right.	Researcher provides medium to high structure and helps to re-establish expectations and norms. Researcher acts as facilitator of teacher research.
3	Cohesion	Teacher and researcher work through each phase of the action research cycle in a co-operative and collaborative manner. Teacher accepts more responsibility for each phase of action research. Teacher provides suggestions about the action research process to the researcher. Teacher becomes an equal partner in the action research process.	Researcher works co-operatively and collaboratively with the teacher. Researcher continues to provide some structure and encourages the teacher to accept more responsibility for each phase of the action research.
4	Interdependence	Teacher continues action research as a regular part of classroom program. Teacher consults and collaborates with researcher as required.	Researcher provides little structure and participates in the action research process on a mutually negotiated basis.

Kind of Motivation	Type of Learning	Optimum Environment for Progression
Motivation is usually extrinsic, e.g., fulfilling course work or thesis requirements, part of a project, research study or publication effort. The intent is often that of pleasing others and issues of control tend to acknowledge the status quo.	Learning tends to be tentative and largely convergent, focused on specific tasks related to launching the action research activities. Learning also relates to how best to negotiate the parameters of the action research.	Identify an area of mutual concern and that is both meaningful and practical. Negotiate and communicate with respect and openness. Begin in a manageable way.
Motivation remains primarily extrinsic to the extent of pleasing others and fulfilling external requirements.	Learning tends to be largely convergent - getting the individual research tasks completed. There is a focus on doing the research as planned and coping with the new working conditions.	Keep the research procedure simple and manageable with clearly identified structure and boundaries. Provide opportunities for regular feedback and regular discussion that features active listening. Provide opportunities for related staff development.
Motivation is both extrinsic and intrinsic. In addition to pleasing others, there is a sense of excitement and a desire to meet own needs and to have some control of the research.	Learning still tends to be convergent, although there are concerns about how to do the research more efficiently and effectively. Concerns about roles and relations appear.	Provide consistent structure, direction and support to the action research process. Continue discussion and focus on building trust and a sense of confidence about the research. Continue staff development.
Motivation is more intrinsic than extrinsic. There is now a concern to share affection mutually and to work co-operatively and collaboratively. There is also a need to develop a sense of competence re the social environment and the research process.	Real learning about the action research process begins to appear. Learning about the content of the research is still mostly convergent. In addition, there is discussion and reflection, although relatively uncritical, about the research.	Continue building a sense of competence about the action research process. Extend the repertoire of inquiry skills. Encourage networking and the sharing of the action research experiences. Celebrate the surprises, the frustrations and personal learnings. Refine the collaboration.
Motivation is mainly intrinsic. Individuals have a sense of competence re their social environment and are able to work collaboratively with an equitable distribution of power and control.	Dialogue is the norm and issues are critically debated. Learning focuses on how to agree within a context of disagreement. Both convergent and divergent learning re the research process are practised.	Focus on new adventures and personal goals beyond the current action research. Consider disengagement issues and negotiate constructive ways to work in a different relationship.

REFLECTIONS

The following statements represent a number of ideas that have either emerged during the action research process or have been rediscovered and articulated as a result of the collaboration that has occurred. They are offered without discussion and are presented in no particular order. Within these statements are potential beginnings for subsequent collaborative action research activities.

* Action research should begin with a concern that is personally meaningful and relevant;
* Think big and start small;
* Ensure that the method is manageable and an integral part of the teaching and learning process;
* There are distinct stages in the action research process with key issues that need to be resolved;
* As with any innovation action research occurs over time;
* The classroom teacher and researcher must come to terms with how best to equitably distribute affection and power;
* Action research is a renewal activity that contributes to a teacher's sense of confidence and efficacy;
* Mutual respect and trust and open communicating underscore all action research activities;
* There are real tasks and responsibilities that need to be sorted out on a regular basis;
* Regular perception checks are required throughout the process so as to negotiate expectations and responsibilities;
* Action research by definition encourages teachers to be informed critically reflective practioners;
* Action research really can enable teachers to articulate the taken-for-granted realities of everyday classroom practice and expose invisible knowledge;

* The action research cycle of planning, observing, acting and reflecting results in a renewed cycle of action research with increasing levels of sophistication and understanding;
* The opportunity to share the findings of the action research with other educators not only provides external acknowledgement but also invites constructively critical feedback;
* Students can participate in action research not only as persons providing information but also as student-researchers.

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